

## Dislodging Israeli Orientalism: Said and the New Historians

Jesse Mintz

History is an intellectual production; a historiographical deconstruction of the production of history reveals the organic and seemingly intuitive connection that exists between any history produced and the ideological environment and political context in which it is created. “Conquerors, my son, consider as true history only what they themselves have fabricated.”<sup>1</sup> These words, spoken by an Arab headmaster instructing his pupil in Emile Habiby’s tragic novel about an Israeli-Arab, speak to the platitude that history is written by the victors. The writing of history actualizes the discourse between knowledge and power. Edward Said’s formative work, *Orientalism* (1978), has been a driving force behind the academic trend to investigate the nature, perspective and bias of the discourse pertaining to the “Other.” The essentializing dynamic of mainstream Western-created and Western-oriented history has given way in recent years to the dissemination of a multitude of heterogeneous historical narratives.<sup>2</sup> The development of indigenous histories has dislodged the previously dominant colonialist or Western historical perspective; likewise, subaltern and feminist studies have sought to relate the history of those otherwise marginalized by a normative historical narrative.

---

<sup>1</sup> Emile Habiby, *Al-Wa’qa al-Ghariba fi Iktifa Sa’id Abi’al-Nabs al-Mutasha il* (The Secret Life of Sa’id the Il-Fated Pessoptimist) (Beirut: Dar Ibn Khaldun, 1974), 37.

<sup>2</sup> See Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32 (April 1990), for a discussion of the emergence of foundational, subaltern and post-Orientalist historiographies.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Said's work has led to a reversal of authority in terms of historiography. In both Israel and much of the West, Israeli historians have generally been accepted as nearly unchallenged authorities, while Palestinian scholars have been relegated as mere propagandists in the realm of Middle East history.<sup>3</sup> Following the publication of Said's *Orientalism*, and to a lesser extent *The Question of Palestine* (1979), the prism of Orientalism and post-colonial thought delineated in his work has been applied to the hegemonic relationship between state power and the creation of knowledge. In conjunction with the advent of postmodernism, Israeli academic and historical narratives have been rethought with the implicit recognition of the effect of the Zionist project on the canonical historiography.<sup>4</sup> What has ensued from this endeavor is the creation of post-Zionist scholarship championed by the New Historians. Holding nothing sacrosanct, post-Zionism reassesses the accepted narrative of the conflict.<sup>5</sup> The effect of post-Zionism has been the narrowing of the gap between the two national, and contradictory, narratives with the aim of producing an equitable, joint historical account. The Israeli New Historians have held the typical Zionist representations of Palestinian history up for comparison with the historical reality, and, by doing so, have elucidated the hegemonic power dynamic evident in the Israeli discourse which is reminiscent of Western Orientalism.

To understand the present, sociologist Gershon Shafir asserts, it is first necessary to contextualize the past. In this vein, New Historians, or revisionist historians, have reanalyzed Israeli history both in terms of the events and their social antecedents, to more equitably explicate the present conflict.<sup>6</sup> Before their historical reading can be appreciated, however, the traditional Israeli historiography must be understood.

Insofar as it is tenable to discuss any *general-public* reaction to the events of 1948 in the Israeli and Palestinian communities, the linguistic patterns used to describe the events provide a window into the mindsets of the disparate social

---

<sup>3</sup> Efraim Karsh, "Rewriting Israel's History," *Middle East Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (June 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Haim Gerber, "Zionism, Orientalism, and the Palestinians," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33 (Autumn 2003): 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> "Post Zionism Only Rings Once," *Haaretz*, 21 September 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Uri Ram, "The Colonization Perspective in Israeli Sociology," *The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader*, ed. Ilan Pappé, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 57.

perspectives. The United Nations decision to partition the British Mandate territory, creating a sovereign Israeli State, is referred to as *al-Nakba* in Arabic, meaning literally: “the catastrophe.” This terminology, with its insinuation of a watershed moment of national disaster and tragedy, stands in sharp contrast with the Israeli notions of *azma’ut* and *shibrur*, independence from the British and liberation from the Diaspora respectively.<sup>7</sup> There existed an inconsistency in the seemingly disparate ideological perspectives of the creation of the State: the Palestinian *al-Nakba*, a tragedy equivalent to colonial subjugation and the Israeli *azma’ut*, which embodied a third-world liberation struggle coming to fruition. This inconsistency, with its genesis in the very birth of the State of Israel, served to entrench much of the divide between the two peoples.

The idea of a revisionist history presupposes the existence of a generally accepted mainstream account. At the risk of essentializing, such an account is recognized by the New Historians to exist in mainstream Israeli, and Western, academia. According to Ilan Pappé, one of the founders and most prominent members of the class of New Historians, mainstream Israeli history is not monolithic; that being said, it generally employs a positivist approach to history which works in conjunction with an ideological platform to maintain the validity of the Zionist discourse.<sup>8</sup> Within this depiction, there are certain tropes that pervade even disparate historical narratives. There exist two recognized phases of Israeli history: the first was the pre-1948 era, beginning with the nineteenth century migrations of French Jews to Palestine; the second was the post-1948 era, dealing with the U.N.G.A. Resolution 181, the creation of Israel and the subsequent conflicts that ensued. It is not sufficient, though, in an attempt to understand contemporary Israeli society and the divide that defines Israeli-Palestinian relations and their contradictory historical narratives, to study merely the events that followed the creation of the state. The founding of the State of Israel was largely understood in mainstream Israeli academia as the teleological conclusion to a national and religious struggle; as such, the context of the founding plays a large role in the psyche of the nation. As Avi Shlaim, notable member of the New Historians, notes: “several of Israel’s foundational myths

---

<sup>7</sup> Ilan Pappé, “Post Zionist Critique on Israel and the Palestinians: Part I: The Academic Debate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2 (Winter, 1997): 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

and hence their relevance to present contemplation of past and future in the Jewish state have been irrevocably undermined,” by the New Historians revisionism.<sup>9</sup> What has resulted is a radically different image of the founding of Israel as compared to the mainstream account.

Understanding pre-1948 Zionist history, according to Palestinian historian Beshara Doumani, provides a window into the “underlying assumptions determining the historiographical agendas” of the Zionist narrative.<sup>10</sup> According to the New Historians, the conventional Zionist account of the founding of the Israeli State by the U.N. can be understood as follows: Jews began migrating near the end of the nineteenth century, first from France, and, subsequently, from all over Europe, to a then empty and barren Palestine. They came as Western ‘redeemers’ of a backwards society and began purchasing land from absentee Turkish landowners. They succeeded in turning the desert into productive, arable land.<sup>11</sup> Simha Flapan, former director of Arab Affairs for the left-wing Mapam party, has identified seven myths which are, more or less, accepted by the New Historians as dominant in general Zionist historical accounts: the Zionists planned for peace following the U.N. partition; the Arabs rejected the partition and launched the war; the Palestinians fled on their own accord; the Arab states united to expel the Jews; the Arab invasion made war inevitable; a proverbial Israeli David defeated an Arab Goliath; and finally, Israel has subsequently sought peace but no Arab leader has responded.<sup>13</sup> The traditional Zionist version, understood thus, is, in the words of Avi Shlaim, “propaganda of the victors.”<sup>14</sup>

The overwhelming majority of historical accounts produced by Israeli scholars deal primarily with the Israeli perspective of the events. The task of

<sup>9</sup> Avi Shlaim, “The Debate About 1948,” *The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader*, ed. Ilan Pappé, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 139.

<sup>10</sup> Bershara B. Doumani, “Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History,” *The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader*, ed. Ilan Pappé, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 11.

<sup>11</sup> For a general overview of the traditional Zionist history according to the New Historians, please see: Avi Shlaim, “The Debate About 1948.”

<sup>13</sup> Eugene Rogan and Avi Shlaim, “Introduction,” *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, ed. E. Rogan and A. Shlaim (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Avi Shlaim, “The Debate About 1948.”

analyzing the Palestinian and Arab perspectives was entrusted to the Israeli Orientalist establishment. Of those who did write about the creation of Israel and the war from an Arab perspective, notably Yehoshua Porath, few dealt with the cultural or human tragedy. The events were analyzed more so from the perspective of foreign Arab nations as opposed to the perspective of the Palestinians themselves; that houses were destroyed was ignored in lieu of an invasion by foreign nations and that villages were wiped off the map was overlooked in the wake of tremendous solidarity by the *yishuv*. The defining cataclysmic event for a generation of Palestinians and their descendents, *al Nakba*, was never dealt with from a Palestinian perspective within Israeli academia. That many within the class of New Historians goal is to “write the Palestinians into their own history,”<sup>15</sup> speaks to the lacuna of Palestinian agency within Israeli academia and narratives. It is this stifling and suppressing aspect of Israeli academia, one that has denied Palestinian’s even a voice in their narrative, that serves as the quintessential Orientalizing aspect of Israeli historiography. According to Pappé:

The absence of the Palestinian tragedy from the Israeli historical account was indicative of a more general Israeli Orientalist view. The historiographical view of the Palestinians up to the 1980s was monolithic and based on stereotyping... From 1948 until 1967, the Palestinians mostly were ignored as an academic subject matter... Since 1967, they have been depicted as terrorists and a threat, though not an existential one.<sup>16</sup>

Even in this new role, as subversive and dissident elements, Palestinians are not granted agency as they are depicted as pawns of a larger pan-Arab or pan-Islamic conspiracy against the Jewish state.

The New Historians have held the general Zionist historical account up to Said’s prism and have found it wanting. Israeli historians have systematically denied the existence of a united Palestinian people before 1948; they denied that existence of Palestinian nationalism or any semblance of social or economic modernity; likewise, they have diminished any active role played by the

---

<sup>15</sup> Doumani, “Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine,” 6.

<sup>16</sup> Pappé, “Post-Zionist Critique on Israel: Part 1,” 5.

Palestinian peoples in their own history.<sup>17</sup> This act, of reducing the agency of an entire people, is indicative and indeed characteristic of Israeli Orientalism as a whole. To admit the people-hood – or even existence – of a unified Palestinian people would be to discredit the entirety of the Zionist project. The few against the many myth of 1948 held the Zionists on a heroic pedestal; to take them off of it, to show that the Palestinians were the underdogs and that tragedy and suffering has indeed befallen them, would be to besmirch the Zionist self image. The best way to deal with this contradiction, Pappé notes, “was simply not to deal with the Palestinian side of the story and, if possible, not to deal with 1948 at all.”<sup>18</sup>

Once it is understood that the Zionist project required, for its own existential self-definition, that the Palestinians remain relegated to a prescribed static role, essentializing tendencies within Israeli Orientalism become evident. These motifs of history not only grew to define the Palestinian “Other,” they also worked in conjunction with the Israeli self-image to create foundational myths. Generally, New Historians recognize a threefold Orientalist myth in Israeli historiography. The Israeli Orientalist discourse asserts that Palestinian nationalism arose in response to Zionism (and consequently that Palestinian nationalism has little historical or cultural underpinning); Palestinian society was stagnant and owes its growth and modernization to Zionist impetus following the first and second wave migrations; and lastly, that the Palestinian social collapse following the war of 1948 was in large part due to an inherent flaw within Palestinian society.<sup>19</sup>

In their revisionist pursuit of an accurate and equitable historical narrative, the New Historians have discredited these myths. Modernist historical readings, which posit that nationalism is a modern invention, join forces in the Israeli context with Orientalist ones as Arab and Palestinian society is castigated for not having created a European-type society. Likewise, it is envisioned that the Palestinians, having been left to themselves, would never have dreamed of a Palestinian identity. Proof of this is often purported in the Palestinian alliance with King Faisal of Syria and the embrace of pan-Syrianism from 1918 to 1920.

---

<sup>17</sup> Gerber, “Zionism, Orientalism, and the Palestinians,” 1.

<sup>18</sup> Pappé, “Post-Zionist Critique on Israel: Part 1,” 5.

<sup>19</sup> Gerber, “Zionism, Orientalism and the Palestinians,” 4.

Yet, as Porath notes, “it was a union of convenience, not a deep-seated union of hearts;”<sup>20</sup> Syria under Faisal was seen as a likely force to overpower Zionism and thus the Palestinian’s embraced the movement. With the ousting of Faisal, though, pan-Syrianism was quickly abandoned among the Palestinian people and Ben Gurion himself, often taken as the exemplar figure of the Zionist movement, recognized – if only tacitly in his memoirs – the existence of a Palestinian-Arab national movement.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the greatest proof of a unified Palestinian people under the British mandate came in the Great Palestinian Revolt of 1936 to 1939, the largest in the British Empire in the twentieth century and, according to Gerber, “proof enough that [a] national feeling existed and was quite intense,”<sup>22</sup> among the Palestinian people.

The stagnancy and backwardness of the Palestinian economy are other reoccurring motifs of the traditionalist Israeli historical accounts. This myth though, of the unconnected and failing rural economies and prevalence of itinerant financial systems in lieu of urban ones, stands in contrast with the historical realities of both the Palestinian and Jewish agricultural economies under the Ottoman’s. The first agricultural colonies established by immigrant French Jews in 1882 collapsed within their first year and were only saved by massive monetary support from Baron Rothschild. A traditionalist historical reading contrasts the primitive Palestinian agriculture with the modern and successful Jewish colonies; and yet, in 1891 Ahad Ha’am commented on the *yishuv* agriculture as follows:

There are now about ten [Jewish] colonies standing for some years, and not one of them is able to support itself ... wherever I strived to look, I did not manage to see even one man living solely from the fruit of his land ... The Arabs are working and eating ... Grief has engulfed us [Jews] alone.<sup>23</sup>

The idea, then, that modern Jewish agricultural practices succeeded where traditional – or backwards – Palestinian ones failed, is clearly unfounded.

---

<sup>20</sup> Yehoshua Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement, 1918-1929* (London: Frank Cass, 1974), 84.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Gerber, “Zionism, Orientalism and the Palestinians,” 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 12.

Beyond mere psychological effects, the Orientalist tradition has played a major role in both the rhetoric of statehood and the policies of the government. D.H.K. Amiran, an Israeli government official, wrote several influential papers on the topic of settlement patterns of the indigenous people of Palestine. Taking into account that the coastal regions of Palestine were more arable, he asked why the indigenous Palestinian population tended to settle in the hill regions of central Palestine. His conclusion is noteworthy for both its postulated answer and its methodology. He ignores historical development and social structure in his analyses and concludes that their settlement patterns serve as a testament to a lack of security and inherent backwardness of society – specifically, the dangerous nature of nomadic peoples and the inability of the Ottomans or Palestinians to utilize modern agricultural methods. His papers surmised that, “it was not the land that was bad, but the fact that it was occupied by people or administered by government who did not make proper use of it.”<sup>24</sup> Amiran’s conclusion fits perfectly into the Zionist foundational myth of a modernizing force saving an otherwise neglected land.

In conjunction with the Zionist modernizing myth exists the generally held notion of Ottoman misrule and political instability in Palestine before the British Mandate period. The image of chaos and anarchy in Palestine, while unfounded, plays nicely into the modern defense of Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East, and specifically one which is representative of the Palestinian people. The general trajectory of the histories dealing with internal Palestinian politics reaffirms the diminished agency afforded to the Palestinian people by Israeli history. Moshe Ma`oz’s formative work, *Ottoman Reform in Syria and Palestine, 1840-1861* (1968), outlined many of the tropes utilized and established the parameters for much of the subsequent political history of Palestine. In it he describes Palestinians as passive victims of Ottoman decline wherein the impetus for modernization lay wholly in foreign influence. Themes of lack of security, an absence of centralized leadership and general anarchy permeate his description while he affords the European inspired innovations of the late-Ottoman, British and Zionist periods credit with modernization. The obstacles to this modernization are located within the indigenous society; he describes tendencies towards “‘Bedouin pillage’, ‘rapacious Pashas’ [local governors], ‘bloody

---

<sup>24</sup> Doumani, “Ottoman Palestine,” 26.



factionalism,' and the incompatibility of Islam with Western forms of government and administration,"<sup>25</sup> as indigenous issues which need to be overcome before modernity can be established. These accounts, while repeatedly asserted to in Israeli historical accounts, fail to stand up to the criticisms of the New Historians. In lieu of the purported misrule and decentralized power of the Ottoman's, the New Historians hold that following the Crimean War Ottoman authority was definitively established, safeguarding trade and economic growth. Local economies flourished and entrepreneurship abounded, attested to by the tremendous growth of the town of Acre from roughly 2 000 inhabitants to around 35 000 propelled mostly by the success of the cotton trade and the rise in the production and export of Jaffa oranges to European markets.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of politics and rule, the New Historians have shown that Ottoman Palestine was governed by parliaments which, however imperfect by modern standards, were chosen by elections. This amount of representative government, absent in the British Mandate period, is often attested to as the beginnings of Palestinian state building and national sentiment. In contrast with the diminished agency afforded to the Palestinians in Zionist writings:

Ottoman reform in the provinces created a true sense of national building for the Palestinians: from the bottom up, scores of administrative, educational, judicial, and welfare institutions were established, all staffed by local Palestinians, all based on modern education and on rules of conduct anchored in new rules and regulations.<sup>27</sup>

That these myths have been roundly critiqued and discredited, and yet remain integrated in the general Israeli historical account, is testament to the strength of the Orientalist discourse in Israel and the contingency of the social fabric on the foundational accounts. Walid Khalidi writes:

What is most striking about the Zionist version of the background, nature, circumstances, and aftermath of the 1947 partition resolution is the extent to which it has become the paradigm or lens through which the entire history of the Palestine problem and

---

<sup>25</sup> Doumani, "Ottoman Palestine," 26.

<sup>26</sup> Gerber, "Zionism, Orientalism and the Palestinians," 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

the Zionist-Arab conflict prior and subsequent to the resolution itself is viewed and judged.<sup>28</sup>

According to Said, there is a clear and identifiable relationship between the discourse of Orientalism and the imposition of colonialism. They are not mutually exclusive movements, but are interconnected with each other. Essentialisms in general, and Orientalism's static and defamatory definition of the "Other," more specifically, both impel and justify the colonialist project.<sup>29</sup> This relationship is not lost on the New Historians. In their application of Said's prism to the Orientalist discourse in Israeli history, they have not stopped short in the logical conclusion: the colonization theory of Palestine in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the current colonization of the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip are predictable, even obvious, outcomes of the Zionist created, Orientalist narrative.

While the notion of an apartheid Israel is a heavily contentious, and, for a good reason, debated issue, such accusations are beyond the scope of this paper. What remains important, though, is the methodology of the New Historians in justifying their claims of racism and colonialism. Shafir, a prominent member of the New Historians, writes of the differences which emerge when pre-1948 Zionist settlements are contrasted with post-1977 Israeli colonization. He continues on to write of the apparent incompatibility of the two epochs: "the colonial Athena seemed to have sprung full-grown from the head of her non-colonial father, Zeus."<sup>30</sup> While Shafir concedes that according to the rationale of Zionism as it is often understood – essentially, a nationalist movement interested in attaining self-determination for a beleaguered people – Israel's actions following the 1967 war and the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip appear as corruptions of Zionism. Yet, in the same manner that Said deconstructed Western writings and found within them thematic justifications

---

<sup>28</sup> Walid Khalidi, "Revisiting the UNGA Partition Resolution," in *The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader*, ed. Ilan Pappé, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 98.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 204.

<sup>30</sup> Gerhson Shafir, "Zionism and Colonialism," *The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader*, ed. Ilan Pappé, 2nd ed. (Routledge: New York, 2007), 80.

for colonialism, so to do New Historians deconstruct Israeli writings and trace a historical ancestry between the two settlement drives.

That the New Historians have extended Said's deconstruction of the Orientalist discourse and applied it to the historiographical tendencies in Israeli academia is undeniable. But while they have succeeded in producing a more equitable portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian narrative, a joint history remains a distant goal. Proof of the divide which yet remains between even members of the New Historians is evident in the works of Benny Morris and Walid Khalidi, two leaders of the revisionist movement. Despite their similar goals of dislodging mainstream historical narratives and endorsing neither the reductive Israeli or Palestinian histories, they remain at distant ends of the historical spectrum on many important issues. Concerning the Palestinian refugees Morris maintains that, "war, and not design, Jewish or Arab, gave birth to the Palestinian refugee problem;"<sup>31</sup> Khalidi, on the other hand, sees even within the research of Morris himself, undeniable proof that *Tochniyat Dalet* (Plan D) called for the government endorsed systematic expulsion of Palestinians.<sup>32</sup>

Such a division is emblematic of the larger schisms within Israeli-Palestinian society. Gayan Prakash writes of the need to establish "mythographies," in post-colonial India; history, he contends, can only empower people to unity and people-hood through the provision of a historical voice. The goal, then, of historians must be to create an historical narrative that, unlike mainstream histories, relates the accounts of subaltern and dispossessed segments of society within a cultural and historical framework. Only through the writing of mythographies, Prakesh continues, is it possible to empower a people so many generations removed from national agency.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps in the Israeli-Palestinian context as well, mythographies can be utilized as a means of providing the self-reflexivity necessary to relate the subaltern stories of the Palestinians while incorporating them into an equitable Israeli account as well.

---

<sup>31</sup> Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 588.

<sup>32</sup> Nur Masalha, "A Critique of Benny Morris," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no.1 (Autumn 1991): 4.

<sup>33</sup> Gayan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories in the Third World: Perspectives From Indian Historiography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32 (April 1990): 24.

The New Historians have begun the project by dislodging Israeli Orientalism; the work, however, is far from over.